

Out of the Deep.

By Owen Oliver

THE *Adolf Karl* brought the first news of the evil that had come upon the earth. She was a Norwegian timber-ship, and a coal-brig running from Newcastle found her waterlogged in the North Sea, and towed her to port. There were only two tall, lightheaded sailors left alive. The older man said one phrase over and over again, and nothing else. "Fishes—fishes! O Lord, the devils of fishes!" The younger sailor kept laughing and sobbing, and claspng and unclasping his hands for hours after he came ashore; but by degrees they got a rambling narrative from him.

He said that a great company of big fishes had come out of the sea in flying machines, and taken and eaten the rest of the crew; but he and the other man had hidden under an old sail. The sea-devils, as he called them, had pulled up the decks and torn open the storehouses, and eaten all the food aboard except a few fragments of biscuit. He and the other man had lived on these for two days till they were rescued. He shivered and clung to those around him whenever he saw a bird flying in the air, thinking it was a sea-devil afar.

The old-fashioned papers ignored the wild story, and merely said that the men had lost their reason through privations; but the halfpenny papers happened to be short of news. So they expanded it into two or three columns, with glaring headlines. They pointed out, also, that three other ships reported having seen afar "enormous flocks of enormous birds," and that nearly twenty vessels were overdue at East Coast ports. This was on Thursday, 26th July, 1906.

On Friday, the P. & O. *Alamanzar* drove ashore near Plymouth, with the furnaces just burnt out. There was no one aboard, and no food except in the refrigerators. Her decks, upper and lower, were burst open. It was noticed that all the planks were broken upwards.

A question upon the subject was put to the Home Secretary in the House of Commons that night; but the Home Secretary considered that the matter came within the province of his Rt. Hon. friend the First Lord of the Admiralty, and his Rt. Hon. friend had "no official knowledge of the matter."

On Saturday morning the *Maplin Castle* came in at Southampton with only a third of her passengers and a fifth of her crew remaining. They told a plainer tale.

They were nearly two days out from Maderia, they said, and two from home, when what appeared to be a cloud of remarkable blackness and size was-observed ahead. The captain, who had been forty years at sea, had never seen anything, like it, and feared a hurricane. In about half-an-hour it was close upon them, and looked more like an incredibly great swarm of large black birds.

At this time a multitude of huge fishes, with six wings, three on each side, began to show themselves upon the surface of the sea. The cloud proved to be composed of similar monsters flying by machinery, and with a paddle-wheel arrangement, revolving with enormous velocity, on each side of their heads. Professor Thorne, who was aboard but did not survive, surmised that these were contrivances for supplying their gills with oxygen from the air to enable them to breathe in our thin atmosphere.

As they bore upon the ship, the fishes in the water rose and joined them. The crew and a few of the male passengers prepared to resist them with hatchets and revolvers. The rest rushed to the companions. While they blocked one another in their struggles to get down, the fishes angled for them with lines which seemed to adhere to whatever they touched. The majority of the passengers were borne shrieking into the air and devoured, before the remainder succeeded in closing the entrances. The crew, and the bolder passengers who had joined them, suffered still more severely. Meanwhile the captain had ordered full speed ahead; and, as the pace proved too great for the monsters, the vessel ultimately escaped. The third officer brought a piece of one of the "fishing-rods," which was broken in a door when it was closed. Major Dunne shot its owner in several places, and the beastly creature fell upon the deck, but two other "fish-devils" had carried it away. The rod was made of a curious, flexible metal unknown to science, but akin to iron. It was apparently used to transmit some attractive force, for it had no adhesiveness in itself.

A dozen torpedo-boat-destroyers were at once sent out to scour the sea. Two only returned. The *Leopard* reported having put a herd of some five thousand sea-devils to flight with its quick-firing guns as they were rising from the sea. The *Myra* had been attacked by a multitude flying overhead, and half the crew, including the commander, seized and devoured; but ultimately escaped by its speed. Portions of the deck and bulwarks had been torn away by the fishing-rods.

The *Myra* returned on Monday, 30th July. On the next day cablegrams reached England that several villages on the Bay of Biscay had been attacked by the sea-devils, and nearly all the inhabitants carried off. The following morning Lisbon, and several other Portuguese and French ports were reported devastated. The evening papers had huge placards:

BRIGHTON, HASTINGS, AND PLYMOUTH
ATTACKED BY SEA-DEVILS.
CHANNEL FLEET DESTROYED.
INDIA AND CHINA INVADED.

After that there were no newspapers.

A continuous service of trains was run night and day from the Southern Coast to London; and trains left London every few minutes for the Midlands, with every carriage and truck carrying double its proper number. Seats were booked for a week ahead. It was understood that millions of monsters were making their way slowly to London, clearing out every town and village as they came. People who could not get in the trains left in carts or on foot.

The Government sent officers down to the coast to report, but none returned; and telegraphic communication was rare. Wires came, however, to say that the monsters were approaching from Hythe, Chatham, and Ashford. It was pretty well established that all the towns on the South Coast were destroyed, and some on the East, and in the North of Scotland; and there was an authenticated statement that a cargo of refugees had arrived from Holland, and stated that the country was completely wiped out. We knew these things from "town criers" sent round by the Home Office. They ceased to come round on August 8th

The next morning I walked along the Strand, and saw two shops open, and counted eighteen people. The buses and cabs had long since departed with passengers inland. I stayed in town myself because I had no money, and could live gratis at the deserted restaurants. In one of them I met a slight, ladylike girl. She had no money either, she said, and no friends in town, and she was very frightened. We kept together afterwards. Her name was Elsie, and she was twenty-two. She had been a typewriter before business stopped. We joined company with a man and his wife for two days. They had three children, they told us, and had sent them to Derby in a County Council train. The Council ran forty a day for children only, before the train service ceased. They could not get in the trains themselves, and the woman was weak and could not walk far. On the third day the man found a wheelbarrow and took her off in it. We never thought to ask their names.

On the 10th August we met a wild-eyed man running in the Mall. He would hardly stop to speak to us. He had come from Wimbledon, he said, and the air was thick with the sea-devils there. A woman who came on a horse told him that they were breaking open every house systematically, and gathering up the people and cattle. They seized her father just as he had placed her on the horse. Elsie and I decided to go inland on foot the next morning. We had found money in some of the empty houses, and we thought that with that and a bag of provisions we could live on the road.

We slept at the Army and Navy Club that night, as we had done for two days previously. There were five old officers there, but they were hospitable, and placed two rooms at our disposal. They'd never run away from anything yet, they said, and they were too old to learn sense. Four of them played Bridge all day, while the fifth, in turn, kept guard at the front door with a revolver to stop the three club servants who remained from flight.

Elsie woke me by banging at my door at about seven o'clock.

"They're coming," she cried. "They're coming, Fred! "

"Run!" I shouted. "Don't wait for me. Go up Shaftesbury Avenue. I'll catch you!"

When I had dressed, however, I found her waiting outside the door; and when I reproached her, she smiled and tucked her arm in mine.

"I thought we'd make a better dish together," she said with a little laugh—and a little shudder.

The veterans were growling in the front hall because the cook had escaped out of a window. We advised them to fly, but they said they might as well be eaten if they would get nothing decent to eat; and they were going to stop and have a final hand of Bridge. So we left them.

We had intended going North, but there were black objects in the sky in that direction. So we made for Charing Cross. The morning was exceedingly dull. It was probably raining; but I do not remember.

When we came to Trafalgar Square we found that the black things were converging upon it from every point of the compass, and driving in the remnants of humanity from the outskirts of London. There were more left than I thought, perhaps five thousand in all. A shrieking mob was rushing up Whitehall, and another along Northumberland Avenue, and another down the Strand, and another down St. Martin's Lane. In the air behind each crowd, and from every other direction, came troops of the sea-devils. The foremost were so near that we could hear their breathing-wheels and distinguish a white line of teeth in their heads. We stood still and gazed helplessly at them.

"It is the end," Elsie said. "You—you have been good to me, Fred." She touched my shoulder softly with the side of her head. It is strange, the power of little things—an old phrase—a glance—the breath of a woman's hair. If she had not done that I should have stood rooted there till we were taken. As it was I caught her by the arm and pulled her along.

"The National Gallery!" I cried. "They may want to preserve it as a memorial of our art—who knows?" I chuckled a metallic chuckle. "Run!"

We knew that a lower door was open, as we had been in there the day before. We reached it just as the forerunners of the crowds came to the square. There was a dark shadow over the doorway; the shadow of an overhanging monster. Its wings were making a soft, flapping clatter as it descended, and the whirr of its breathing-wheels was loud in our ears. Elsie gasped, and staggered. I seized her in one arm, and carried her to the door and fumbled at it. It was perhaps two seconds before I turned the handle the right way. It seemed hours. My teeth chattered, and my hands trembled so that I could scarcely fasten the door.

We wandered aimlessly through the galleries and tried to talk about the pictures, but our words broke off in the middle. At last we stood still, holding one another's hands. Elsie's face was ashy white; and I felt cold and moist and sick.

"We'd better hide in a cellar," I suggested. "They mightn't find us there."

"Anything is better than waiting like this," she said suddenly. "Let's look out and see what they are doing."

We found a room, at the end of the water-colours, looking into the Square, and stood in the corner behind a screen, and peered round it. Sometimes when I am in the middle of a jest the scene comes back to me and I am struck dumb. Sometimes Elsie would pause in her laughter, as she plays with her baby, and put her face in her hands; and it is years ago now.

The crowd had huddled together in the Square and the empty basins of the fountains—a sea of white upturned faces, with the statues in between. A few—very few—were screaming. A few were laughing insanely. Others were contorting their faces horribly. Some had fainted, but still kept their feet, wedged in by the crowd. Most of the women had their heads on men's shoulders. Some held children in their arms.

A guard of the sea-devils had settled on the roadways round the Square. A countless multitude were poised in the air overhead. It was proved afterwards that there were some twenty varieties, but they all looked of one devilish pattern—fishes, about ninety feet long, with disproportionately large heads and disproportionately short, broad tails. They were covered with blackish-green scales that looked like armour. They had light green, phosphorescent eyes, about twice the bigness of a liner's port-hole, and terrible mouths, ten or twelve feet wide, shaped like a shark's, and showing immense jagged teeth. Their scales crackled and rustled as they moved.

The front half of their body was girt with a framework of black-grey metal, since called marium. It extended along their backs towards the tail, like a skeleton deck. This deck carried three pairs of wings with marium ribs, and an inky-black membrane stretched between. The front of the framework supported the breathing-wheels, or artificial gills, as they are accepted to have been. These were composed of concentric circles of a substance now termed pelagium, which scientists say is neither metal nor nonmetal, but a new class of element. Each circle revolved upon that within it, so that the velocity of the outer circle was enormous. The outermost layer was a soft leathery material, which has been named philoxon, from its extraordinary powers of drawing the oxygen from the air. The few remains of this, however, were so charred by combustion that nothing definite can be said about it. The "fishing-line" was a thin, flexible, marium rod, which operated from the front of the "deck," and was coiled there when not in use. It was about two hundred feet long, and the thickness of a very stout clothes-line.

How this machinery was controlled, or how it had been made by these creatures, who had no members, like our hands, capable of graduated pressure and contact, remains unknown. Most people, however, accept the conjecture of the learned Von Raben, that they manipulated matter by means of what he termed "piscian magnetism"—a force generated by the fishes themselves, and which they were able to graduate and control to the finest degree. The experiments upon the scales of the monsters (which ended with his unfortunate death) proved that when electrically stimulated in a certain manner, some portions of a scale would attract, and others repel, and so work a wire, or a thin plate of metal into various shapes—portions being held firmly, while the neighbouring parts were driven away. So that each scale was virtually a many-fingered hand.

As we watched the monsters, the long fishing-rods came slowly forth, wavered in the air, dipped among the crowd, that ceased to sway, as if fascinated. There was a shriek—shriek upon shriek—men, women, and children were lifted up in the air as if they were bound to the fishing-lines, though there was no visible means of attachment. Some of them hung limply; others beat at it with their hands—and could not draw them away again. Then it carried them to the shark-like mouth.

Elsie buried her face under my jacket, and we shrank behind the screen. The shrieks grew fewer and fewer. Presently they ceased. Then a series of crashes began. I laid Elsie down (she had fainted) and peeped round the screen again. The long metallic lines were tearing out the windows and sides of the houses across the Square, by adhering to them and pulling them outwards, and searching the premises. Now and then one brought out a man or a woman. They would fish for us, I thought, next.

I lifted Elsie up and staggered away to the galleries, till I came to the end room of the Dutch-Flemish school. I pulled a big screen covered with small pictures close to the wall, and sat huddled on the floor behind it, with her head on my knee. We were just under a man's portrait by Rembrandt, with a painting of a fish and poultry shop beside it. I have forgotten the name of the painter, and I would not, for worlds, go there again to look. I listened with my ear against the wall for the approach of a clinging line; but I heard nothing. Possibly they wished to preserve some specimens of our art, for throughout the country they did very little damage to churches, museums, or galleries.

A lean, half-starved cat came round the screen and mewed piteously. I screamed aloud at the sound. Then I held my breath, wondering *if they* had heard. A spider made its way slowly down a cobweb, and dropped on the floor. I could hear it drop, everything was so still. I shook Elsie to try and rouse her, to hear her voice. I half rose to fetch some water to restore her, but sat down again. Her unconsciousness was so merciful! I stroked her face gently. She had been so cheerful, and so contented, and so kind. Poor little Elsie! There was a sound of distant thunder outside, and a flash of light invaded the darkness. I saw the cat standing there with its back arched. I called to it, "Puss, puss." There was another flash and rumble. Elsie sighed, turned her face a little closer against my hand, and looked up.

"Are—we—dead?" she asked in an awed, halting whisper. "Dead?"

I told her briefly what had happened. She was silent till another flash startled her.

"I thought they were coming," she whispered. "If they took us it would be over. I must see what they are doing. I must!"

"Very well," I agreed dully. It did not much matter, I thought. Nothing mattered. I lifted her on her feet and half carried her to the stairs that led down to the Turner water-colours. There was a good view of the Square from there, and we stood some way back, a few steps down the stairs.

It was thundering heavily now, and jagged streaks of lightning were darting across the yellow sky. The rain was pouring down in streams. The sea-devils were bellowing to one another. I could not tell whether in pleasure or fright. Some were marshalling the rest, and those on the ground were rising into the air. One stared in at our window as they passed, but he did not pause. His eyes looked like great green lamps. The bellowing grew louder and more urgent, and the rain became so heavy that one could scarcely see through it. Then a sea of light covered the place, and a hurricane of thunder. The windows shivered in fragments, and the wet air rushed in. Nelson's Column tottered. I was blinded and deafened for a few moments. When I could see again the Column was down and the monsters were falling headlong on the Square and the houses. In a few seconds the place was heaped with their mangled remains. I thought I, was mad or dreaming, because I heard no sound as they fell; but when I did not hear my own laugh, I knew that I was still deaf. We stood staring at the ruins—staring—staring!

"God has delivered us!" Elsie said at last—her voice sounded faint and a long way off. "God!"

"God!" I echoed—He had been only a name to me before.

We stood looking out of the window in silence for a long time. The yellow fog melted away and the sun came out and the sky was blue. Then Elsie borrowed my handkerchief and wiped her eyes. "If only we could forget," she said. "If only we could forget!"

We went back to the galleries. A dozen dead and mutilated monsters lay in them. The glass roofs were broken where they fell in, and most of them had crashed partially through the flooring. It shook as we walked over it; but we had been too frightened to fear any more. We found some biscuits and tinned meat and brandy and water in a room below, and ate and drank and washed. Then we slept for a couple of hours; till Elsie woke and woke me.

"They are all dead everywhere," she said confidently. "Let us go."

She tidied her hair with a brush and comb that she always carried, and put her hat straight before a glass. There, was a pink bow at her neck, and she retied it carefully. I laughed suddenly—a jarring, unmirthful laugh.

"I thought the whole world was altered," I said; "but you are still a woman."

She drew a slow, deep breath.

"I suppose it is foolish," she said, "but I don't like you to see me look as if—as if I didn't care how I looked to you."

I took her hand and we went out. We found every way blocked with the corpses of the sea-devils. After several attempts to find a passage through, we decided to climb over them. It was then that we learnt that the scales were not armour, but tough hide, like that of a hippopotamus. We climbed by holding on to the metal framework, and finding footholds in the crinkly hides. I mounted first and pulled Elsie after me, and lowered her down before me.

The air was full of a fishy odour, and we felt faint. We thought at the time that this was due to the smell; but now I believe it was owing to the partial exhaustion of the oxygen of the air by the breathing-wheels. A few that were not broken or hampered still revolved slowly, and one or two of the monsters were breathing feebly. Their hides rose and fell a foot or so as we walked over them. Some of the "fishing-lines" were dangling in the air. One of them touched Elsie's dress, and I had to cut a piece with my penknife to get her away. She pinned the skirt carefully together to hide the rent. The green eyes were all open, and some blinked at us helplessly, malevolently. The journey across the Square was a waking nightmare of three hours, from one till four. In Pall Mall East we had to climb over several more dead monsters that lay across the road.

Dozens of the monsters were lying in St. James's Square. So many had fallen on the War Office that it was crushed like an eggshell. The front of the club was broken out and none of our friends were left. The cards were scattered over the card-table, and on the floor there were a couple of cigar-cases. One of them bore the silver monogram—C. V.—of General Vine, the courteous, bent old warrior, who had invited us in as we wandered by.

We found food and drink in the basement, and laid down and slept. We did not wake till early in the morning. I put on some clean clothes that were lying in a dressing-room, and Elsie found a new dress in a house in Pall Mall. Her hat did not match it, she said with a sigh. We took some money, in case there was still use for money in any part of the world. Also we took a big bag of food. We could get water anywhere.

Then we wandered to St. James's Park. Dead monsters lay all over it. Their breathing-wheels were all still now, and smoking as if they burnt. The oxygen had doubtless set up combustion, when the creatures no longer assimilated it.

Buckingham Palace was a heap of bricks, and most of the houses down Buckingham Palace Road were ruins. We reached Victoria Station without meeting a soul. Elsie gripped my arm suddenly with both hands.

Suppose," she cried, "there is no one left, but you and me? It is the end of the world!"

"The end of the world!" I echoed with a groan.

"There must be someone left," she said after a pause of frenzied silence. "There must! We will find them. Come!"

We went into the S. E. & C. Station. The roof was smashed in, and the whole station badly damaged. There was a heap of luggage on the platform, and a guard's cap. A little further on there was a child's ball and doll. Elsie picked up the doll and kissed it. I did not look at her, but walked away down the long, main-line platform.

About fifty yards beyond the platform there stood a solitary engine and tender. I walked out to them and inspected them while I waited for Elsie. The boiler, I saw from the gauge, was full of water, and the furnace was laid. I lit it, and we stood on the platform till there was enough pressure to start. Then I turned the steam on cautiously and we went forward at six or eight miles an hour. Luckily the points were set to a clear road out of the station. We passed slowly over the bridge (the river was full of bodies of the sea-devils), through Battersea; Clapham, and Brixton. There was no sign of life anywhere, not even a dog, or a cat, or a bird.

There is no one left," Elsie said. "No one. I used to think people uninteresting, and now—and now—"

"We shall find them presently," I assured her; but I doubted it.

We passed Heme Hill and came to the long-gardened houses of Dulwich. There was a tent and a table laid with an unfinished meal in one. In another a bicycle was turned upside down for cleaning

"That is Thurlow Park Road," I said, "where the station is. I used to know a man that lived there."

"Call to him," she suggested. "The people may be only hiding."

I stopped the train and shouted. Elsie cried out at the sound of my voice. We had spoken under our breath for the last two days. There was no answer.

"Call again," she implored.

I shouted wildly; but there was only the echo in reply. Then she called in her clear, high voice

"People! Dear, people! The monsters are dead—dead! We are friends—friends to everybody in the world—They are all gone. And they lived; and loved. Fred, we are all alone!"

"Perhaps—" I began; but she looked at me, and the hopeful words died on my lips. "If there is only me," I said, "I shall be good to you, Elsie."

"Oh, yes!" she cried. "It isn't *that!* I am glad it is you. Only let us go on."

We went slowly on till the houses grew fewer and the country more open; and still we saw no one—nothing—alive; only the dead monsters lying here and there.

Then we saw the Medway like a silver snake afar. At about three we came to Rochester Bridge Station. The water was getting low in the boiler and we were tired of standing on the platform. So we got out and walked on to the public bridge, and looked up and down the river. There was no smoke from the tall chimneys, or from the dockyard at Chatham below; no sound or movement anywhere. There were boats at the pier and boat raft, barges at anchor or run ashore; but no crew to any one. Great black bodies were floating on the tide. A number of them had jammed and blocked up two spans of the bridge.

We wandered along the banks of the river, and up into the Borstal Road. We found a house that had a couple of bedrooms undamaged, and stayed there for the night. The stillness was terrible—terrible! There was a half packed portmanteau in one room, and a litter of children's playthings in another. Some leaden soldiers were set out for a mimic battle. Elsie told me she should never smile again.

In the morning, however, she found a hat that matched her costume, and came down to the dining-room to show me.

"We must find people," she said with a gay little laugh. "If it is only to admire my hat. Oh! But she who wore it—she who wore it!"

She flung it suddenly on the ground and buried her face in her hands. I picked it up and put it on her.

"It makes you look nice," I said. "You are all I have to look at now, you know."

She put on the hat silently, and we went out together. As she passed the hall mirror she glanced at it and took my arm.

"It does suit me," she said, "and—you'll like me to look nice, won't you, Fred?"

"You always look nice," I told her.

We tramped out into the country and saw two birds. They were ungainly, flapping rooks, but we watched them lovingly. The air was sweet, and the sky was blue, and the sun was shining.

Presently we tramped back to the town by way of Watts's Avenue. The rents in the houses, and a long row of water-carts—some of the shafts had been broken evidently in tearing out the horses—made us depressed again. We went down the Maidstone Road, into the High Street, and turned to the right. We went as far as Luton Road, and found no one. Then we turned back to Rochester. We raided a few shops, and I offered Elsie some jewellery; but she would not have it. It did not matter what she wore now, she said.

"We shall find people further down the line," I declared.

"But they will be changed," she said. "Life will be different—everything will be different—no one will laugh or sing or smile—no one will care how anyone looks. But if only we could find a few people to cry with, Hark!" She clutched my arm.

We listened, and heard the sound of a man's voice afar. We took a hasty step forward. Then we stopped and looked at one another. It was a man's voice—and we feared!

"We must be careful," I warned her "We do not know what manner of men they are. There is no law, no order, no police. We are in a state of nature."

"Yes, yes!" She clung to me. "We must be careful. But their 'nature' may be good."

I shook my head.

"In the state of nature," I told her, "life is solitary, hasty, brutish, and poor. Everyone takes what he wants, and keeps what he can."

"Fred!" she whispered. "You won't let them take me!"

I smiled grimly and drew a revolver from my pocket. I had taken it from a shop in town some days before.

"Not while I live," I vowed fiercely. "What I have is mine!"

"Yes," she said quietly. "I am yours." That was our love-making and our betrothal.

We walked stealthily down the street, keeping close under the houses, till we came in view of the courtyard outside the town hall. About two dozen people—men, women and children—were standing there. They looked hungry and travel-worn and fierce. A tall, gaunt clergyman was preaching.

"The Lord," he said, "has taken much; but He has left us one another. The Lord has swept away the past; but He gives us the future. The Lord has given us sorrow; but He gives us work. Dear friends, our work is to comfort and help one another. Let us begin. And now to God the Father—"

We came out from the shadow and stood with the others for the benediction. When it was finished, the clergyman held out his hand to us.

"Dear friends," he asked, "what can I do for you?"

"Marry us," I said.

And we knelt down in the square, and were married there and then; and when we rose and would have joined in the day's labours, the others pushed us laughingly away. We should not work on our wedding-day, they vowed, and they would make ready a house for us. And we went and stood on the bridge, and looked up the river and down the river—on the ruins and the black monsters turning in the tide. And we smiled—and smiled.

To-day, though there are so few of us on earth—handfuls of men and women and children (and our children among them)toiling in the ruins of town and country we have still a smile. For here on earth we have one another; and afterwards there is God!